



# Christa McAuliffe

Teacher  
in Space

## Up for the Shuttle's Challenge

When Christa McAuliffe boarded the space shuttle *Challenger* in January 1986, she was the exceptional ordinary American — the schoolteacher chosen from among 11,000 applicants to fly with the engineers and space specialists.

McAuliffe was the face of the Teacher in Space Project, NASA's effort to reconnect Americans with the space program. In 1959, when NASA introduced its first group of astronauts, Americans were spellbound, but the excitement diminished through decades of mostly successful missions with mostly technical goals.

The Teacher in Space Project was a departure. In announcing it in 1984, President Ronald Reagan said, "All of America will be

reminded of the crucial role that teachers and education play in the life of our nation. I can't think of a better lesson for our children and our country."

Until she was selected as a candidate for space, McAuliffe's life story was unremarkable. The eldest of five children in a middle-class family that combined Irish, Maronite Lebanese, German, English and American Indian roots, she went to college, married her high school sweetheart, had two children and taught history, law and economics. She was an avid gardener, and she sewed clothes for her family.

McAuliffe also was an innovative teacher, creating a course on the role and history of women in the United States and leading her students on frequent field trips. "Christa was always a believer in the educational value of direct experience," her mother wrote.

*Challenger* was to be the ultimate field trip. From orbit, McAuliffe was to teach lessons about the crew's roles, how the shuttle flies, and the shuttle program's technological advances. She also planned to film science lessons to be distributed after the flight.



McAuliffe, 37, was an enthusiastic voice for the space program and teachers as she trained for her mission. The launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, on the chilly morning of January 28, 1986, was shown live in schools throughout the country.

Just 73 seconds into the flight, *Challenger* broke apart, and the seven crew members died. An investigation determined that a design flaw in a seal in the solid rocket boosters caused the accident. It also found that the culture within NASA discouraged action on safety concerns.

Hours after the *Challenger* disaster, Reagan spoke to the nation to praise the seven who died as explorers. "The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave," he said. "The *Challenger* crew was pulling us into the future, and we'll continue to follow them."

Christa McAuliffe, picked from 11,000 teacher-applicants to be the first private citizen to ride in space, says goodbye to fellow teachers before she leaves for NASA training. Photos © AP Images



# Prominent Arab Americans Featured in This Series



Abdu



Ahmed



El-Baz



Gaida



Akkad



DeBakey



Hayek



Kasem



Gibran



Haiek



Masry



McAuliffe



Khaled



Khannouchi



Said



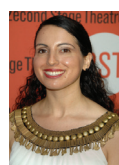
Salama



Shihab Nye



Rihani



Shamieh



Zerhouni



Zewail



Tlaib

**Rashid Abdu**, Physician

**Ahmed Ahmed**, Comedian

**Moustapha Akkad**, Film Director

**Michael DeBakey**, Heart Surgeon

**Farouk El-Baz**, Geologist

**Gaida**, Singer

**Kahlil Gibran**, Artist and Poet

**Joseph Haiek**, Publisher

**Salma Hayek**, Actress

**Casey Kasem**, Radio Broadcaster

**DJ Khaled**, Rap Music Artist

**Khalid Khannouchi**, Marathon Runner

**Ferial Masry**, Community Activist

**Christa McAuliffe**, Teacher in Space

**Naomi Shihab Nye**, Author

**Ameen Rihani**, Poet

**Edward Said**, Author and Activist

**Kareem Salama**, Singer

**Betty Shamieh**, Playwright

**Rashida Tlaib**, Politician

**Elias Zerhouni**, Medical Vanguard

**Ahmed Zewail**, Chemist